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FINE ART: Drawing attention

Tom Holder's work ought to get his name in lights

By Susanne Forestieri

Why aren't you famous? A silly question, but a roundabout way to express my sincere admiration for Tom Holder's work, some of which is now being shown at Rosemary's Restaurant. I'll get to his answer and my thoughts on the subject a little later in the review, but I think you'll figure it out before then.



Art professors used to give their students one piece of advice when they graduated: Go to New York, the art capital of the world. What they didn't say, but should have, is: Don't go to Las Vegas. (Art museums, galleries and patrons are a very recent addition to our town.) Lucky for us, but probably not his career, Tom Holder settled here during what are referred to as the good old days.

The year was 1971, and UNLV needed an art professor. Tom Holder came for an interview and, looking for the campus, he drove by several times before he realized the few scattered, nondescript buildings were the campus. Mike McCollum, then the art department chair, said by way of enticement, "We can do anything we want." That clinched it for Holder. Building an art department appealed to him. He has been building the art department, a family and a house in the desert ever since.

His recent abstract and semi-abstract paintings reflect the artist he has become in 36 years of living in the desert. Before moving here he regarded the long stretch from California to Las Vegas as a vast, empty place with nothing to see, but he changed his mind. Looking hard ("what artists do"), but also reflecting on nonart subjects like geologic structure and time, helped him "see" the underlying beauty. Although Holder's aesthetic was formed in the late '70s and early '80s, which was still the tail end of the heyday of abstract expressionism, his recent work is inspired by the structural beauty of desert landforms. As he consults topographical maps of Death Valley, his imagination is fired by names like Badwater Basin and Cottonball Marsh. Images form in his mind even before he visits the sites. The finished paintings are more imagined spaces than illustrations of real places.

His process reveals a great deal about him and his work. His equal fondness for constructing and painting led him to invent a process that allows him to do both at the same time. In the group of abstract paintings, what at first glance look like thickly painted bars of color are really collaged strips of fiberglass mesh tape, used in construction. My favorite of this group is "Echo Canyon," a diptych of colored bars in a delirious range of hues, from deep burgundy to buttercup yellow and bright turquoise.



Like a jazz improvisation or Bach fugue, the color theme appears on the left, then reappears on the right in different combinations or variations of colors. There's a pattern; but just when you think you've got it figured out, you're surprised by an unexpected juxtaposition of colors. All the bars are strictly horizontal, until the final flourish in the upper right-hand corner, which seems to say, "I'm outta here."

The semi-abstract "Dirty Sock Hot Springs" (above) shows another side of Holder. A large triptych that wittily pays homage to and recapitulates some of the major art movements of the late 20th century (abstract expressionism, abstract formalism and pop art), it's both humble and self-assertive, each panel acknowledging a debt to a well-known artist or movement while demonstrating a command of each style. In a demonstration of intelligence and skill, he harmonizes the disparate styles into a coherent whole. The unifying element in the three panels is color—not by repetition but by a subtle alteration of each hue from panel to panel. Reading from left to right, the panels get compositionally simpler and more tightly structured. On the surface, it's a chronological sampling of art movements; but is it also a reflection of the way life gets simpler as we grow older?

Holder's paintings show a supreme colorist at work and the ability to unite feeling and intuition with compositional aplomb. So why isn't he famous?

His answer is "not ambitious enough, not a top priority." My answer is, it's easier to explain why someone is famous, with the exception of Paris Hilton, than not. Holder has made the choice to build a home and family, teach what he knows about and create the occasional masterpiece. Don't miss this opportunity to see his work.



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